WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A sheathed scalpel comprising:

a handle having a proximal end and a distal end;

a blade attached to the distal end of the handle and having a cutting edge and a tip; and

a sheath attached to the handle and having a central passage configured to receive the blade, wherein the sheath covers the blade when the blade is retracted within the central passage and exposes the cutting edge of the blade but not the tip when the blade is advanced within the central passage.

2. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 1, wherein the central passage has an aperture.

3. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 2, wherein the cutting edge of the blade is bowed and exposed though the aperture when the blade is advanced.

4. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 3, wherein the bowed cutting edge extends beyond the aperture by a depth in the range from 2 mm to 5 mm when the blade is fully advanced.

5. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 2, wherein the aperture is diagonal relative to a longitudinal axis of the handle.

6. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 1, wherein the sheath has a structure disposed thereon to mate with a structure on the handle so as to prevent further advancement of the blade when the blade is advanced so that the blade tip remains covered.

7. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 1, wherein the central passage has an internal edge near a distal end thereof and the handle has an edge which mates with the internal edge of the sheath so as to prevent further blade advancement.

8. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 1, further comprising a detent mechanism for limiting travel of the sheath relative to the blade.

9. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 8, wherein the detent mechanism comprises a series of axially spaced apart ribs or grooves on the handle and a spring detent or tab on the sheath.

10. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 1, further comprising ribs on an inside surface of the sheath.

11. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 1, wherein the sheath is transparent or translucent.

12. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 1, wherein the blade is fixed relative to the handle and the sheath advances and retracts relative to both the handle and the blade.

13. A sheathed scalpel as in claim 1, wherein the sheath is fixed relative to the handle and the blade advances relative to both the handle and the sheath.

14. A sheath for use with a scalpel having a handle, a blade attached to the handle, and a structure on the handle, the sheath comprising:

an elongated housing having a central passage configured to receive the blade and an aperture disposed to expose a cutting edge of the blade when the blade is advanced within the central passage, wherein the housing fully covers the blade when the blade is retracted within the housing;

wherein the housing has a structure disposed thereon to mate with a structure on the handle so as to prevent further advancement of the blade when the blade is advanced so that a tip of the blade remains covered while a bowed cutting edge of the blade is exposed through the aperture.

15. A method for making a small incision through skin overlying an intercostal space, the method comprising:

providing a scalpel having a sheath;

retracting the sheath relative to the scalpel so that a part of a scalpel blade is exposed beyond the sheath; and

advancing the scalpel blade through skin overlying the intercostal space to form the small incision, wherein a cutting depth of the scalpel blade through the overlying skin is limited by the sheath.

16. A method as in claim 15, wherein retracting comprises exposing only a bowed cutting edge of the blade so that an exposed area of the scalpel blade is reduced.

17. A method as in claim 15, wherein the sheath is retracted to provide a cutting depth of the blade in the range from 2 mm to 5 mm.

18. A method as in claim 15, wherein the retracting leaves a leading tip of the scalpel blade covered within the sheath.

19. A method as in claim 15, wherein retracting comprises engaging an internal edge of the sheath with an edge of a scalpel handle.

20. A method as in claim 15, further comprising aligning the scalpel blade with an aperture of the sheath with ribs on an inside surface of the sheath.

21. A method as in claim 15, further comprising extending the sheath over the scalpel blade so that the scalpel blade is housed within the sheath.

22. A method as in claim 21, wherein extending comprises engaging a spring detent or tab on the sheath with at least one outer rib or groove on a scalpel handle.

23. A method as in claim 21, further comprising re-retracting the sheath relative to the scalpel so that the scalpel blade may be advanced at least a second time.

24. A method as in claim 15, further comprising advancing a blunt member through the small incision and the intercostal space above the heart to establish an intercostal access tract.

25. A method as in claim 24, further comprising advancing a direct cardiac massage device through the intercostal access tract.